

Officials oppose cuts in Amtrak

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NEWARK - New Jersey's two U.S. senators and acting Governor Codey on Friday asked President Bush not to cut federal funds for Amtrak, saying any reduction would have disastrous effects for their state's commuters.

Earlier this week, congressional aides said Bush will propose ending federal subsidies for Amtrak's operating expenses for 2006 when he unveils his budget on Monday. It was not yet publicly known what the proposed cuts may total.

Amtrak has wide support in Congress, and it is considered unlikely that lawmakers would agree to eliminate the operating aid. The aides said the president will propose \$360 million for the maintenance costs of local commuter railroads, which are concentrated mostly in the Northeast and use Amtrak lines and other equipment.

But that money would be available only if Amtrak went bankrupt. For the current year, Amtrak's capital infrastructure budget, which includes maintenance costs, is about \$418 million. Most of that money is for the Northeast Corridor.

In a letter sent Friday to Bush, Democrats Jon Corzine and Frank Lautenberg urged the president to reconsider his proposal. The railroad has no long-term funding mechanism or trust fund and has to rely on year-to-year appropriations by Congress.

"Without an adequate federal funding commitment for the next fiscal year, Amtrak will again be brought to the brink of bankruptcy as it was in 2002," the senators wrote. "This will have disastrous effects for New Jersey commuters, who rely heavily on Amtrak."

In a separate letter to Bush sent Friday, Codey said any cuts to Amtrak would severely impact the state's traffic congestion, quality of life and economy.

"Without the [Northeast] Corridor, New Jersey would have to build 600 lane miles of capacity - three times the length of the Garden State Parkway - for the additional automobile traffic that would be generated,"

Codey wrote. "Without the Corridor, small businesses such as newsstands, convenience stores and cafés would lose \$200 million in

annual revenues in New Jersey alone."

Nearly 4 million New Jersey residents ride Amtrak yearly, and about 185,000 daily commuters take 337 NJ Transit trains that operate along Amtrak's Northeast Corridor. Bush proposed \$900 million for the current budget year, and Congress ended up providing nearly \$1.2 billion.